

***Kwakiutl, Tlingit and Tsimshian:  
A Cultural Outline***

**Raven** – mother's despair and cruel brother; came upon old man and heated beach pebble would solve problems; Raven in human form and provided for mother; visit to uncle and battle; **flood** and people perish; flew to sky and house of Petrel, bark excrement, box of water, pitch tree and black; darkness and tough to get food, flew to sky, cedar leaf and chief's daughter, baby cries and box of light, escapes and requests fish, but scolded and ignored, broke open box, **light** but also great northern wind, fishermen frozen into stone; Raven hungry and hurt ankle, house of Pitch and wife, feed and heal ankle, go fishing, but return before hot, kept in canoe under mat, "Little Pitch?" and finally no answer, melted and run onto halibut and **black on one side**, go to wife for food, but only little spruce tree, return to canoe for halibut, but only small spruce log

Given **Raven** (competitive, aggressive) and **the landscape** he and other First Peoples created (narrow jagged coast line, **dark dangerous mysterious forest**, no transportation, houses look out to the **rugged sea for food and travel**; yet also provider of **abundance** via salmon and other fish and leisure time and islands protected from storms)

= **world view**

- A. world a hostile, rough, volatile, full of opponents; competitive, hierarchical world;
- B. world is very expressive, passionate, extreme, lived with exuberance, indulgence, intensity

**manifested** in such examples as:

– **social structure:**

- a. "life is a ladder" **ranked class system** of nobles, commoners and slaves and ranked positions within – greatest insult was to call someone a "slave"

- b. ranked dance and **ceremonial societies** – Hamatsa cannibal society

- **potlatching** as mechanism for moving up ladder: "we don't fight with weapons, we fight with property; validating self via great gift giving extravagance, and shaming one's rivals; excessive redistribution of property

- **warfare**: "killing to wipe one's eyes" i.e., getting even by making another household mourn

– **artistic expression:**

- a. in visual **wood arts** such as masks and totem poles;

- b. **dance** and ceremonial performance

- **shaman** – "*paxala*" one who has "gone through" – a person who can both cure a disease and through it into someone else – so while you look to sea for food (mundane), you look to the forests for spirit (sacred)

**Economy:** crux of subsistence economy revolves around **fisheries**:

- Japanese currant sweeps entire coast causing rain and fog but prevents harsh cold and nurtures abundant marine life; for a few months out of the year, beginning in April able to obtain with relatively little effort entire year's food
- renowned and graceful Nootka ocean-going canoes 40 to 60 ft., harpoon darts, whaling, salmon

**Arts:** representing and making visible what is normally invisible and mysterious, be it spiritual or social ranking, and bring to bear the power of the spiritual

- **wood**-base art form, applied to other forms
- **pervasive:** carving, weaving, architecture, utilitarian items
- **formline:** often of red or black, the single most important element, as it swells and diminishes, governing design and relationship of and connecting all units;
  - one form are the **ovoids**, located at the joints, shoulders, hip, wrist, ankle, tail, dorsal fin = ball and socket joint
- based upon principles of **balance** and symmetry, filling **vacant space**, allowing **distortion** to provide impressionistic, yet standardized images
  - beaver = large incisor teeth and tail; killer whale = prominent dorsal fin; bear = large paws and mouth with protruding tongue; eagle = large beak curved down; hawk = large beak curved up

**Social Rank:**

- privileges: use certain names; animal figures on paintings, poles, masks, utensils, etc.; tell certain oral traditions; sing certain songs; dance certain dances; “speaking mouths” and the rights to certain amounts of gifts in potlatches relative to this privilege

**Potlatch:**

- held at any rite of passage (birth, puberty, marriage, death) and to assume new step on ladder, to validate new position, by giving gifts in excess to others with high interest rates of repayment during their subsequent potlatches; involve members of opposite clan such as Ravens and Wolves
- **Chilkat blankets** (name for a sub-group of Tlingit) widely desired and traded, used in potlatches, as no loom, each part made separately, at least 6 months to complete, fibers of inner bark of cedar tree, wool of mountain goat

- “**coopers**” – shield-like each named with its own history, increasing in value with history and parts broken off and reassembled
- **totem poles** – embellished once obtained metal woodworking tools; inside houses, heraldic and family history poles, mortuary poles, memorial poles, potlatch poles, ridicule poles; process is end in itself, as not repaired or maintained

**Warfare:** e.g., 1857 a Kwakiutl woman stole Bella Coola Hamatsa whistle; year later Bella Coola attack a Kwakiutl village killing hundreds including those from other tribes, all but 7 men and 5 women, heads mounted and village set afire; Kwakiutl retaliate attacking and killing all in the first Bella Coola village came to

**Winter Ceremonialism and Secret Societies:** summer is *Bakoos* (time fishing and non-ceremonial activity) while winter is *Tsetseka* (spiritual active ceremonial time) – purpose of ceremonials is to display inherited powers, promote the collective welfare by bringing powers to community, and initiate new members into the societies

- *Hamatsa* most complex, highest ranked (others e.g., Grizzly Bear, Warrior), and spiritually powerful; under the inspiration of *Bakbakwalanooksiwal*, a powerful man-eating spirit; theme of kidnaping by spirit, possession and power demonstration with the right then to dance and become member, exorcism or “tamed”; all set within a very dramatic theater of transformation and interchangeable masks, echo masks, mechanical parts, whistles and voice tubes, with a house of hidden passages and ceiling openings, curtains and “prop men,” to provide illusion, terror, drama, comedy and surprise

**Healing and Shaman:** *paxala* – foresee future, heal the sick, bring success in fishing, control the weather and spend disease to enemy

- art and **masks are subtle and surrealistic** (With potlatches and winter ceremonialism highly decorative displays of personal status, spectacular and dramatic)
- **rattles:** cockleshell rattles, raven rattles, oyster catcher rattles (most common); with sound the songs of the spirits and the extension of the tongue to refer to transference of power
- **soul catchers:**